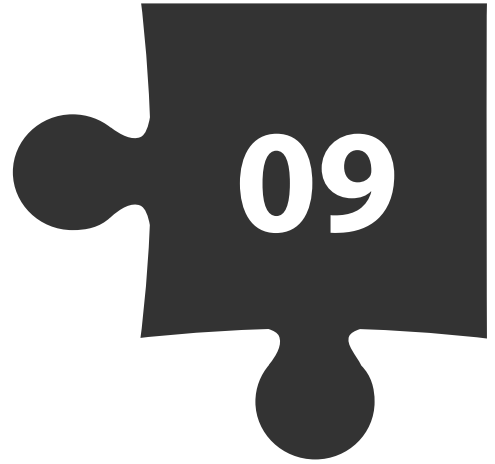


# Unfinished Business?

Faith Communities and Reconciliation  
in a Post-TRC Context



# Creating space for truth

## Reconciliation Studies and the 2014 TRC re-enactment

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### Introduction

Before engaging in scientific analysis and critical reflections, I would like to start with a personal statement: The days in October 2014 in Stellenbosch, as well as the preparatory meeting in February, have been part of the most impressive and inspiring times in my entire life. The preparatory meeting in February gathered many experts on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) from South Africa,<sup>2</sup> some international guests like Ralf Wüstenberg<sup>3</sup> and me from Germany, as well as the co-organisier of the re-enactment, Mpho Tutu on behalf of the Desmond and Leah Tutu

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  - 3 Prof Dr Ralf K Wüstenberg is Chair of Systematic and Historical Theology at the European University Flensburg. His habilitation was a comparison between the South African TRC and the Enquête-Commission of the German Parliament after the GDR. This work is published in German: Ralf K Wüstenberg. 2004. *Die politische Dimension der Versöhnung. Eine systematisch-theologische Studie zum Umgang mit Schuld nach den Systemumbrüchen in Südafrika und Deutschland. Öffentliche Theologie*, 18. Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus; a shorter English version is published as Ralf K Wüstenberg. 2009. *The Political Dimension of Reconciliation in South Africa and Germany*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.

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Legacy Foundation. The preparatory meeting familiarised the international guests with the actual challenges of reconciliation in faith communities and discussed issues such as how to successfully bring all important actors to attend the meeting. I admired the inclusive and welcoming approach and the deep theological reflections during the meeting when they discussed questions, such as: What is the glory of God? Would a gathering of Christian churches alone not be against the spirit of the TRC? During the preparatory meeting as during the re-enactment, I could participate in the South African way of approaching reconciliation, to reflect on it, integrate it into communication and planning and put it into action. Until today, I consider those two visits in 2014 as a deep and lasting experience that left their imprint on my life as well as on my research.

Walking through Stellenbosch one October evening, I received the clear insight and deep conviction that reconciliation is not just one topic of Christian ethics or one element in a transitional process, but it is ‘the’ thing, ‘the’ goal I have to search for and strive for in all themes within ethics, in all social relationships, in all political problems. After that moment, the question of reconciliation was again highly interesting and relevant to me, as it has been for many theologians and philosophers before me. It was the German philosopher Georg Friedrich Wilhelm Hegel, whose entire philosophical system was built on reconciliation and whom, until October 2014, I had considered to be too far from twenty-first century scientific approaches.<sup>4</sup> And, it was Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who in the fragment of his *Ethics* on “The Love of God and the Decay of the World” had written:

Now anyone who reads the New Testament even superficially cannot but notice the complete absence of this world of dis-union, conflict and ethical problems. Not man’s falling apart from God, from men, from things and himself, but rather the rediscovered unity, reconciliation, is now the basis of the discussion and the “point of decision of the specifically ethical experience”. The life and activity of men are not at all problematic or tormented or dark: it is self-evident, joyful, sure and clear.<sup>5</sup>

In Bonhoeffer, I found, at least *in nuce*, an approach that puts reconciliation first, that makes reconciliation a ‘reality’ and not simply a goal or foundational ideal of ethics.

4 Cf. Michael O. Hardimon. 1994. *Hegel’s Social Philosophy. The Project of Reconciliation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Erzsébet Rózsa. 2005. *Versöhnung und System. Zu Grundmotiven von Hegels praktischer Philosophie*. München: Wilhelm Fink.

5 Dietrich Bonhoeffer. 1995. *Ethics*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 30. Cf. Dietrich Bonhoeffer. 2015. *Ethik. Dietrich Bonhoeffers Werke*, 6, Sonderausgabe. Gütersloh: Gütersloher, 311. See also: Marti Leiner. 2015. Kreuzestheologie und Versöhnung. In: Seoul Theological University (ed.), *The 2015 Seoul Theological University Spring Academic Conference*. Seoul: Seoul University, 16-24.

In 2014, when I attended the TRC consultation, I have been working for more than five years on research projects and Summer Schools on reconciliation. In 2012, in a programmatic article, I identified the principles of research on reconciliation.<sup>6</sup> These principles, I believe, remain important even today, even though, I wish to add, that the universal approach to reconciliation became apparent from the TRC consultation. It is the 'thing' to be looked for wherever one can. Before I start my analysis of the TRC re-enactment, it may be useful to reflect, shortly, on the Jena approach, as it will be from this perspective that I will describe the re-enactment.

## The Jena perspective on Reconciliation Studies

Reconciliation in the political sphere can be defined, in a broader sense, as every step taken toward the re-establishment of good or, at least, toward a normal relationship after atrocities were committed such as war, civil war, genocide and gross human rights violations that characterised, for example, slavery and apartheid. In a narrower sense, reconciliation means the re-establishment of good relationships that includes serious attempts at working through past events, apologising for misdeeds, forgiving, achieving justice, paying reparations and replacing a culture of mistrust and hatred with one of peace and understanding. This perspective includes the awareness of situations where reconciliation is possible only in a broader sense. Nevertheless, it should be reconciliation in a narrower sense that should be the goal.

The Jena perspective starts from the observation that, in Peace Studies, following a phase of resolutely innovative and multidisciplinary-skilled founding fathers and mothers (such as Johan Galtung, Dieter Senghaas or Alva Myrdal), a phase of disciplinary specialisation, the third phase of transdisciplinary integration has begun. Therefore, 'transdisciplinarity' is the first characteristic of the Jena Approach. What exactly does this mean?

Transdisciplinarity combines three insights: firstly, to understand a complex topic such as reconciliation, contributions by many disciplines are needed. Indeed, many disciplines bear a high potential for Reconciliation Studies. Among these disciplines are Arts, Communication, Cultural Anthropology, Diplomacy, Economics, Education, Ethics, History, Law, Linguistics, Media Science, Medicine, Neurosciences, Philosophy, Political Science, Psychology, Sociology, Theatre, Theology, Regional Studies, Religious

6 Cf. Susan Flämig and Martin Leiner. 2012. Reconciliation in the Middle of Dispute. Introduction to the Series. In: S Flämig and M Leiner (eds.), *Latin America between Conflict and Reconciliation*, 1. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 7-19.



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Studies, Rhetoric, Security Technology and Urbanism. There are other disciplines as well that may prove to be relevant for reconciliation studies.<sup>7</sup>

Secondly, it is not enough to exchange questions and results at the crossroads of diverse disciplines. Rather, one needs to delve into another discipline's presuppositions, its inner structure, its methods and its ways of creating knowledge, as well as into its limits. Only by doing that may one find a complete picture of complex processes such as reconciliation.

Thirdly, the cooperation of all those disciplines should be directed at a common practical goal: to find better ways toward reconciliation and to understand how reconciliation works or fails. In a context where there exists so much knowledge on how conflicts break out and how they can be won by violent means, we need more knowledge about how reconciliation can be achieved. However, Reconciliation Studies start from a disadvantaged position, since violent ways of ending conflict are rewarded through media attention and money spent on weapons and military. Reconciliation, on the other hand, has to be achieved with much less attention and fewer financial resources. Transdisciplinarity tries to strengthen the hand of reconciliation in this unfair competition.

The second characteristic of the Jena approach to Reconciliation Studies is its 'comparative approach'. We believe that every process of reconciliation is unique. What works in South Africa does not necessarily work in South America; what works in Germany does not necessarily work in Austria. Nevertheless, one may learn much from similar processes of reconciliation worldwide. Even experiences in distant places and times may inspire and offer insights into possible mistakes. Only through comparison, we may hope to find some universal principles of reconciliation.

In many studies, particularly in the sphere of political 'realism', 'hard facts' such as borders, weapons, laws and economic strength, are greatly valued. Scholars sometimes more or less underestimate cultural and psychological realities, such as ideologies, the effects of media, national traditions, myths and symbols, or group identities. The Jena Center for Reconciliation Studies (JCERS) tries to strengthen that approach with a 'media and symbol-oriented perspective'. Cultural and psychological realities often are decisive in how conflict evolves.

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7 To give just one example, archaeology is not needed in all conflicts, but in the case of disputes on the Haram As-Sharif (Temple Mount) in Jerusalem it may be a necessary part of peace negotiations.

The most well-known element of the Jena approach to Reconciliation Studies is the so-called 'Hölderlin Perspective'. The name is a reference to German poet Friedrich Hölderlin (1770-1843). At the end of his novel, *Hyperion* he wrote that "Versöhnung ist mitten im Streit und alles Getrennte findet sich wieder (Reconciliation is in the midst of strife and everything separate is rediscovered)."<sup>8</sup> The Hölderlin approach is directed against a common view that sees reconciliation only as post-conflict reconciliation. No conflict would end if, in the middle of the conflict, some people would not start with negotiations and with reconciliation. No rule says that wars, for example, must be fought until the end. Internal and external actors, who want to end them can end them. To give two examples: In 2003 the Liberian civil war, led by a violent rebel group called Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD) against the dictator Charles Taylor, was ended by internal protests of women's groups. Also, International Track II diplomacy facilitated by the Sant'Egidio Community in Rome ended civil wars, such as between Renamo and Frelimo in Mozambique, in 1992.

The Hölderlin Perspective is deeply rooted in the New Testament. Jürgen Moltmann describes it in his *Ethik der Hoffnung* (Ethics of Hope):

According to Ephesians 2 and Colossians 1, through Christ's giving of himself God has created 'peace' between Gentiles and Jews, since he 'brings the hostility to an end' through himself<sup>9</sup> and proclaims peace to those who were near and those who were far off. In the Epistle to the Colossians, the cosmic dimension is added to this concrete peace between Jews and gentiles, since through Christ God 'has reconciled to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross'.<sup>10</sup> In the human dimension as well as in the cosmic one, it is important to perceive that God has already made peace; so for human beings, the one thing necessary is to perceive and accept what is objectively already existent *sub specie aeternitatis*, whether in human conflicts or the cosmos. 'God was in Christ and reconciled the cosmos with himself',<sup>11</sup> the 'peace in the midst of strife'. In the depths of the paralysing and often deadly conflicts between the peoples, this *divine peace* [Moltmann's italics] already reigns. In the divine depths of the universe, everything is already reconciled.<sup>12</sup> [My translation – ML]

8 Michael Knaupp (ed.) and Friedrich Hölderlin. 1992. *Sämtliche Werke und Briefe*, 1. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 760: "There's reconciliation in the middle of strife, and all that's apart comes together again."

9 Eph. 2:16.

10 Eph. 1:20.

11 2 Cor. 5:19.

12 Cf. German original: Jürgen Moltmann. 2010. *Ethik der Hoffnung*. Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlag, 265.

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For the view of Paul and the authors of Colossians and Ephesians, reconciliation is always already a reality; it must only be accepted and presupposed like a house we can inhabit. Never in a conflict is there 100 per cent war and violence – there are always elements of peace present.

On the other hand, to say that reconciliation occurs in the middle of the dispute, also means that in this world, there is never 100 per cent peace. There are always conflicts and the possibility of violence. Reconciliation is a long-term process that requires the will to overcome resistance and challenging times. It needs a willingness to be patient and to continue acting for reconciliation during an extended period. In combination with what our partner from Tel Aviv University, psychologist Arie Nadler, has developed as the needs-based model of reconciliation, the Hölderlin Perspective involves the acknowledgement that the needs of people in the process of reconciliation must be respected. According to the pyramid of needs of Abraham Maslow, this especially pertains to basic needs – food security, medical care, houses and also security in a general way. Often people favouring reconciliation maintain some critical distance to the idea that investment in security can be an essential part of a successful reconciliation process.

In many cases, this is important. Usually, one precondition is a successful reform of the police, necessary because the police are often deeply involved in the perpetration of violence and, as such, to the perpetuation of violent and discriminatory attitudes. Moreover, one must also consider that there must be dealt with the number of weapons in a context of violence, the feeling of anomia after system changes, normal criminal activity and violent spoilers of the reconciliation process.

The above implies that reconciliation is not a state, but an almost neverending process. Understood this way, reconciliation is an unfinishable passion. Therefore, some spirituality, even atheistic spirituality or existentialist spirituality in the way Albert Camus, in his *Myths of Sisyphos*, described it, is probably needed for continuous efforts towards reconciliation. As the world is not repairable in the sense that people killed cannot come back to life and stolen time through imprisonment cannot be given back, no reconciliation process can be successful unless it addresses religion in the sense of dealing with the unresolvable. The commitment to a specific religion can help to motivate persistent engagement for reconciliation. Indeed, every religion is a great resource of inspiration for reconciliation.

‘Universal and deep reconciliation’ is the fifth specific element in the Jena approach. As described above, the re-enactment of the TRC in 2014 inspired it. First, it means that reconciliation is not a system of knowledge and methods

to be applied. It is a heuristic term: To do reconciliation research is to search for reconciliation everywhere, to dig below the surface to find the reality and possibilities of reconciliation. One must always try to get to the narrower sense of reconciliation. As already underlined in the comparative approach, no context is identical to another. If something works in one place, it is not guaranteed that it will work in another area as well.

Nevertheless, we should not shy away from bringing knowledge gained in an analogous situation in the search for deeper reconciliation everywhere. Wherever one looks, one should ask whether there exists reconciliation and not how it may change 'if' reconciliation would become more of a reality. The following may serve as guidelines:

- a) In a concrete conflict or reconciliation process, we ask: Is there a multiparty approach that integrates everybody and his or her needs? Is the mediator perhaps slightly biased towards one side or the other, or is he/she entirely committed to being pro-peace, pro-people and pro-reconciliation? These questions are often helpful to analyse situations where one party is only talking on behalf of other parties in the conflict or deciding on their behalf without taking into consideration their explicit points of view and their needs. At best, such a behaviour can be described as paternalistic, based on the wish to do good to others, while in reality, misunderstanding the others' needs. At worst, non-multiparty approaches to conflict work with negative stereotypes and demonise absent others, who are often fuelled by fear, anger and hatred propagated by incorrect versions of history. An example for the paternalistic approach today is the many administrations that deal with indigenous populations, provided houses they do not want in regions they do not want to live in<sup>13</sup> and/or who are used as the exhibition pieces in a living ethnological museum.<sup>14</sup> Too seldom the long way is taken that requires listening to them individually, recognising them in an encouraging atmosphere and allowing them to find their voice to express their needs and their will.<sup>15</sup> An actual example of demonising and propaganda based on false historical facts is how many Israelis and Palestinians see each other – especially those who had been excluded from the negotiation table.<sup>16</sup>
- b) After a violent conflict, one should ask one key question on memory policy: Does the history at exhibitions, in political speeches on memorial days and

13 One actual example of that is the State of Israel that provided houses for Bedouins, that only a minority accepted.

14 The Native American Reservations in the US and the Indian Reserves in Canada are the most studied examples for such a policy, but also in Latin America, Africa, Asia and Australia similar phenomena are numerous.

15 This is one point where reconciliation theory connects with postcolonial theorists. Cf. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. 1988. *Can the Subaltern Speak?* Basingstoke: Macmillan.

16 Cf. Zeina M Barakat. 2017. *From Heart of Stone to Heart of Flesh: Evolutionary Journey from extremism to moderation*. München: Herbert Utz.



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history in school curricula include aspects of reconciliation or not? Many schoolbooks, political speeches and many exhibitions, many monuments and national myths contain no reference to reconciliation; they only tell stories of heroism, victimhood and superiority over the other. It will be crucial to overcome and to change those narratives to tell the entire truth.

- c) We also include questions like: Are there elements of unreconciled relationships in society and its institutions, in people's lives and their conditions and in their reality as a whole that directly impacts the reconciliation process? If people feel bad about the State and its institutions, if they suffer from poverty, unemployment and poor health conditions, or even if they think that life did not give them a fair deal, if they see their existence on the whole as something negative and lose faith in a sufficiently just and good world or in God's good creation,<sup>17</sup> it will be difficult (yet, not impossible) to achieve reconciliation with a concrete partner. Therefore, reconciliation research should address those general questions, too. These questions seem to me, particularly timely for European and American countries as well where many people now vote for populist politicians who are expressing the generalised lack of satisfaction and inner peace. These politicians then direct these emotions towards oversimplified and damaging answers. Reconciliation in these cases will also imply a deeper understanding of the processes including the relationship between wealthy people and the rise of populism that directs possible criticism against the unjust distribution of wealth against scapegoats, such as refugees.

## The TRC and its Faith Community Hearing in 1997

It is important to return to the original TRC itself, particularly to the Faith Communities' Hearings in East London, in 1997, to prepare an interpretation of the 2014 re-enactment in Stellenbosch. Comparative interpretation, as one central point of the Jena approach also includes the diachronic comparison between the original TRC Hearings and the re-enactment.

First of all, another comparative observation: since the 1980s, several commissions have had truth and reconciliation as a priority on their agenda. The South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, therefore, was not the first commission of its kind. In the 1980s in Latin American countries, such as El Salvador and Ecuador, instituted commissions to finding the truth of the past. In April 1990 in Chile, the

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17 It is not surprising that Desmond Tutu underlined the created goodness of every human being and made that belief a part of his message of reconciliation: "You and I, too, are fundamentally good. We are tuned to the key of goodness. This is not to deny evil; it is to face evil squarely. And we can face evil because we know that evil will not have the last word ... To be hateful and mean is operating against our deepest yearnings that God placed in our hearts. Goodness is not just our impulse. It is our essence." Desmond Tutu and Mpho Tutu. 2010. *Made for Goodness. And Why This Makes All the Difference*. London: Rider, 5ff.

Comision Verdad y Reconciliacion (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the so-called Rettig Commission) started its work. Nevertheless, the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission became the most famous commission and a model worldwide. Until today, for many, the South African TRC is 'the' TRC. Why is this the case? In my understanding, it is because the South Africa TRC had at least three unique characteristics that distinguished it:

- the public recognition that was given to victims;
- the popularity of the leading actors; and
- the extent and nature of social learning offered to South African society.

All three characteristics relate to truth. The South African TRC created the space for victims to speak the truth. Well-known and popular actors, such as Nelson Mandela, Desmond Tutu and Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela, promoted the South African TRC and underlined the fact that truth could play a distinctive role in the reconciliation of the country. Because of the popularity of Mandela, Tutu and others, there was an openness in large parts of the South African society to listen to the truth. All these effects are also found in other TRCs that underlined the importance of truth but not on the same level as in South Africa's case. In Chile, for example, the commission investigated human rights violations over a shorter period (nine months, from May 1990 to February 1991) than the South African TRC. The commission in Chile held 45 to 60 minutes hearings between family members of victims and two or three persons, usually a lawyer, a social worker and a law school graduate. These meetings took place without any public presence.<sup>18</sup> Merely a summary of the meetings was ever published. Paul Rettig Guissen, the president of the commission and president of State Patricio Aylwin, had a specific, mostly national popularity, but never became world-renowned personalities like Mandela or Tutu. The entire Chilean TRC looked more like a preparatory gathering for legal action, not like a public ritual to recognise victims, to change society and to spread reconciliation. The social learning triggered by the Chilean society happened more in the legal court cases and the investigations necessitated by those legal actions than during the Rettig Commission. The investigations, done by Judge Juan Guzman, for example, received a lot of public attention, also through the documentary, *The Judge and the General* (2008). Guzman became a model of social learning, as a man who first did not believe the truth of the crime narratives and then, chosen by lot, became an investigator and changed his view on the Pinochet regime.

18 See United States Institute of Peace. 1991. *Report of the Chilean National Commission on Truth and Reconciliation*. <https://bit.ly/2UwNCLm> [Accessed 1 March 2018].

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The South African TRC, however, focused on the truth and discovered the truth as a changing moment in the life of individuals as well as in the history of the nation. Even the fact that legal proceedings were uncertain and, in some cases, even impossible, probably had positive effects on the discovery and the possibility of telling the truth. Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela, in an interview with the German weekly, *Der Spiegel*, formulated it as follows: “Tribunals encourage people to deny their guilt. The TRC invites people to tell the truth. In court the guilty are punished, in the truth commission repentance is rewarded.”<sup>19</sup> At tribunals, perpetrators are so threatened by the punishment that it is tough to consider them as safe spaces of freedom to tell the truth. But victims are also often put into threatening and traumatic situations by lawyers of the accused so that they usually do not feel free or safe to tell the truth. In such circumstances, to create spaces for the truth to be freely shared is not a simple challenge at all. “One of the most difficult things to do in life, for people and for nations, is to face the truth about the past.”<sup>20</sup> Christian faith underlines that being truthful and being able to speak the truth are exceptional situations. The normal state is that we are not connected with the truth and living in the truth; only by chance or – to use the more precise, but often religiously-connoted word – by grace, is the way paved for people to come into the truth and remain within it for a specific time. Again, according to Hölderlin, “Reconciliation is in the middle of strife ... truth is in the middle of a world of denying, lying, shying away and hiding from the truth.”

My main thesis, therefore, is: Even if there are many shortcomings regarding the South African TRC in terms of justice, implementation and incompleteness in addressing issues, the exceptional and probably most fundamental achievement of the South African TRC was creating a public space for truth telling and for listening to the truth, against the background of the need for reconciliation, recognition and forgiveness that would diminish fear and shame. The TRC also operated against a background of a ritual of acknowledgement and respect for the victims, who could feel secure that their testimonies were listened to respectfully.<sup>21</sup>

The centrality of truth was underlined in the statement: “The Truth will set You Free”, already made by the South African Council of Churches, in 1995:

19 See, Katja Thimm and Johann Grolle. 2006. Angst vor dem Geruch von Blut. *Der Spiegel*, 8 May.

20 Charity Mjiza. 1999. Hearing the Truth. In: J Cochrane, J de Gruchy and S Martin (eds.), *Facing the Truth. South African faith communities and the Truth & Reconciliation Commission*. Claremont, South Africa: David Philip, 167-169.

21 Cf. Martin Leiner. 2017. Beichte und Buße in Südafrikas Wahrheits- und Versöhnungskommission. *Berliner Theologische Zeitschrift*, 34, January:125-140.

The Commission for Truth and Reconciliation is not another Nuremberg. It turns its back on any desire for revenge. It represents an extraordinary act of generosity by a people who only insist that the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth be told. Space is thereby created where the deeper processes of forgiveness, confession, repentance, reparation and reconciliation can take place.<sup>22</sup>

In many cases, Christian churches welcomed the focus of the TRC on truth and its openness to deeper processes of reconciliation. The churches that partook in the hearings also recognised their guilt as many of them played a role during the apartheid years. The Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa (Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk, NGK) was a crucial player in those years. In his *A Long Way to Freedom*, Nelson Mandela describes the relationship between it and the apartheid government as follows:

The premise of apartheid was that whites were superior to Africans, Coloured, and Indians, and the function of it was to entrench white supremacy forever. As the Nationalists put it: "Die wit man moet altyd baas wees" (The white man must always remain the master). Their platform rested on the term 'baaskap', literally boss-ship. A freighted word that stood for white supremacy in all its harshness. The policy was supported by the Dutch Reformed Church, which furnished apartheid with its religious underpinnings by suggesting that Afrikaner were God's chosen people and that blacks were a subservient species. In the Afrikaner's worldview, apartheid and the church went hand in hand.<sup>23</sup>

Following a general principle in reconciliation research, those who contributed to a problem are required to play a role in its solution. Therefore, it is not surprising that the churches were requested to play an essential role in the TRC processes. As we have heard during this consultation, Mandela himself insisted that TRC commissioners should include representatives from the NGK community!

The Church hearings during the TRC's work in 1997 took place in East London, Eastern Cape, from 17-19 November in a church building. Several faith communities from a variety of religious traditions made submissions<sup>24</sup> – African Traditionalists, African Churches, the Baha'i Faith, Buddhism, Catholicism, Islam, Judaism, Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity. Submissions also included those by many churches and church associations in the Protestant tradition, such as the Baptist Convention of South Africa, the Baptist Union of South Africa, the *Belydende Kring* (Confessing

22 South African Council of Churches. 1995. *The truth will set You Free*. Johannesburg: SACC, 24.

23 Nelson Mandela. 2013. *Long Walk to Freedom*. New York: Little, Brown and Company, 111.

24 For a list of the submissions and the text of most of those submissions, see University of Cape Town. Department of Religious Studies. 2020. *Archive: TRC Faith Community Hearings: Submissions*. <https://bit.ly/2UF1N1d> [Accessed 9 March 2018].

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Circle), the Church of England in South Africa, Church of the Province of South Africa, the NGK (DRC), Scripture Union and Seventh Day Adventist Church, also the South African Council of Churches, the United Congregational Church of Southern Africa, Uniting Reformed Church of South Africa and the United Methodist Church of South Africa. Unofficially represented, but present via individual testimonies was the Reformed Churches in South Africa (Gereformeerde Kerk in Suid-Afrika, GKSA). A separate statement was presented by Ms Cathy P Makhenye, underlining the role of 'women in religion'. The Research Institute on Christianity in South Africa (RICSA) at the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Cape Town prepared the meeting, leading to the RICSA Report<sup>25</sup> that summarised faith communities' submissions, their experiences under apartheid; it critically analysed the discourse during the East London hearing, noticed shortcomings and developed ideas for a possible 'road to reconciliation'<sup>26</sup> that included practical recommendations.

The RICSA Report includes interesting reflections on the understanding of reconciliation and finds three main understandings of reconciliation in the submissions, as well as in the discourse among South African churches:

- "Some of the faith communities still thought that reconciliation equalled members of different groups 'getting together'."<sup>27</sup>
- For others, reconciliation cannot be less than this, but must necessarily include redressing justice and overcoming systemic economic inequality.
- For others, again, reconciliation is above all the confession of sins before God and humans, repentance and forgiveness.

If one wants to, one may call these three understandings of reconciliation:

1. 'getting together'-reconciliation,
2. just-reconciliation, and
3. truth-confession-reconciliation.

The RICSA Report states that:

... a clarification of the meaning of the concept of reconciliation needs to take place within and between faith communities – but as a motivator, not as a substitute for action! The ambiguity of the term creates problems.<sup>28</sup>

The RICSA Report suggests replacing the term 'reconciliation' with the concept of 'healing'. That proposition seems to be the consequence of a lack of willingness

25 RICSA (Research Institute on Christianity in South Africa). 1999. *Faith communities and apartheid: the RICSA report* (forthwith The RICSA Report). In: J Cochrane, J de Gruchy and S Martin (eds.), 1999. *Facing the Truth: South African Faith Communities and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission*. Cape Town: New Africa Books, 13-77.

26 This is the title of Chapter 4 of *The RICSA Report*.

27 *The RICSA Report*, 59.

28 *Ibid.*, 60.



to take a clear decision for an integral understanding of reconciliation as a long-term project that necessarily has truth, justice, togetherness and healing as its central topics. However, the RICSA report is not consequent in its use of the term 'reconciliation' when it uses the word 'reconciliation' as opposed to 'truth' and 'justice', for example:

The prioritising of reconciliation over truth and justice was evident in the panel's weak response to the Dutch Reformed Church representation, where it seemed as if the DRC [NGK]'s attendance at the hearings was sufficient to confirm them on the path to reconciliation.<sup>29</sup>

This way of using terminology has its roots in the 1980s when, still under apartheid, when the term of reconciliation was used and misused by the white government.<sup>30</sup>

In addition to that, the report addressed the issue of non-Christian faith communities and the term 'reconciliation'. During the preparations of the East London meeting, there were many accusations that the Commission would have a loaded Christian understanding of reconciliation. However, the RICSA-Report rightly observes that also the Christian Churches had, according to the three main understandings of reconciliation, even in details very different interpretations of the term. At least the Jewish Gesher movement, Faried Esack and the Muslim Judicial Council submitted elaborated understandings of reconciliation according to Judaism and Islam faith communities. The Islamic understanding of reconciliation, presented by Esack and the MJC in their presentations at the hearings, includes that of returning stolen property, resulting in an equalisation, the restoration of balance between victim and perpetrator. Interestingly, the understanding of the idea propounded by the ICT and some other Christian groups is closer to this than the understandings of more conservative Christian groups.

According to the RICSA Report, there were certain shortcomings of the East London Faith Community Hearing such as:

- Problems in acknowledging the role of women in the process. "It was unfortunate that a separate submission had to take place from a group representing women in religion – especially in the light of the role of women in the struggle demonstrated by the early testimonies to the Commission. [...] The speakers at the faith community hearings were mostly male. There was little mention of women as victims of oppression and abuse in the submissions of the faith communities, and as little of their agency in opposing apartheid."<sup>31</sup>

29 Ibid., 67.

30 Cf. Thomas OH Kaiser. 1996. *Versöhnung in Gerechtigkeit. Das Konzept der Versöhnung und seine Kritik im Kontext Südafrika*. Neukirchen: Neukirchener.

31 Ibid., 73.

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- The lack in addressing the Christian Media, theological training institutions and also right-wing religious groups such as the Gospel Defence League and Frontline Fellowship. The Report also observed Christian domination of the TRC-process. “The result of all that. Added to the overwhelming Christian ethos of the hearings, few Muslim will be able to ‘own’ the process.”<sup>32</sup>

Two main challenges reappear in the RICSA Report: economic justice and the implementation of reconciliation in the entire communities. Unlike at the Stellenbosch re-enactment, the concrete issue of land ownership of churches,<sup>33</sup> questions of a wealth tax,<sup>34</sup> “the project of a Jubilee year 2000 where debts are cancelled, the land is returned, and equalisation of resources takes place”,<sup>35</sup> and the issue of reparations between churches<sup>36</sup> played an important role, at least in the report. Nico Smith’s letter of confession underlined the problem of implementation. Smith had sent a letter to pastors (12 000) across South Africa, allowing them to sign a confession of complicity in apartheid. Only 396 responded with signatures. The RICSA Report commented on that: “We have little conclusive proof that the faith communities – and especially the Churches – are serious in their commitments to owning the past and moving ahead into the future.”<sup>37</sup> The main challenge remained reconciliation in many parishes and between members of churches. Smith’s experience shows that in South Africa, in 1997, one still had a situation where reconciliation was a small element in the middle of a frozen conflict that may have escalated into violence quickly.

The RICSA Report made seven recommendations:

1. Faith communities shall initiate their own processes of healing on the local, but also an interreligious level.
2. That process should integrate the entire life.
3. Institutional and denominational splits shall be overcome.
4. Reparations.
5. Create a safe space of trust for the articulation of pain and lament.
6. A biannual meeting, such as the *Kirchentag* in Germany, should be introduced.
7. Religious leaders shall take the lead in the construction of new values for society as a whole, according to Mandela’s and Mbeki’s call.

The Jena approach complements the second recommendation: “... to integrate the entire life into reconciliation”. The RICSA Report intended that the whole of

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32 Ibid., 67.

33 Ibid., 62.

34 Ibid., 65.

35 Ibid., 74.

36 Ibid., 74ff.

37 Ibid., 72.

society be healed. One of the central questions posed at the 2014 re-enactment at Stellenbosch was: “Has South African faith communities come closer to this goal?”

## The 2014 re-enactment of TRC

On 8 and 9 October 2014, the following faith communities made submissions: the Anglican Church of South Africa, the Methodist Church of South Africa, the Catholic Church, the Uniting Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa, the Baptist Union of Southern Africa, the NGK, the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa, the GKSA, the Apostolic Faith Mission of South Africa, the Evangelical Alliance of South Africa (TEASA), the South African Council of Churches (SACC), the Muslim Youth Movement of South Africa, the Muslim Traditional Council, the South African Tamil Federation, the Maha Sabha and the South African Jewish Voices for a Just Peace. The NHK presented an unofficial report. The meeting ended with witnesses’ comments, the singing of the South African National Anthem and a benediction in Afrikaans.

The most remarkable achievement during the 2014 re-enactment was the space for the truth that the faith communities used. Some used it more, others less, but there had been astonishing statements of self-criticism. There were moments where people opened their hearts and expressed their deepest feelings. During many presentations, one did not hear the usual institution-protecting discourse, many church leaders often adopt. It was a shared, dialogical journey towards deepening of the desire for change that was, at least, present in some of the interventions. In Europe, we have rarely experienced similar discourses in meetings of faith communities. When the Human Rights Commission of the TRC created an innovative ritual of recognition of victims,<sup>38</sup> the Faith Communities’ Hearings created a new type of meeting of faith communities, united by a long-term process of reconciliation, reporting on what had been done and reflecting on shortcomings and tasks to fulfil. Discourse analysis will show, that the 2014 TRC re-enactment was not dominated by discourses that defended interests or tried to push agendas. Both types of discourses were present, but a self-critical, reflective and open attitude dominated the presentations. Unflattering details were addressed directly. Those dialogical and public hearings created a space for the truth and, by doing so, created pathways for transformation. It is my plea that such meetings were also introduced in faith community meetings themselves and, if possible, in faculty meetings, too – in Germany and across the world.

38 See Martin Leiner. 2017. Beichte und Buße in Südafrikas Wahrheits- und Versöhnungskommission. *Berliner Theologische Zeitschrift*, 34(1):124-140.

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I wish to focus on two examples among the submissions: those by the Methodist Church of Southern Africa and the NHK. For the Methodist Church of Southern Africa, Bishop Ziphozile Siwa apologised, since he could not attend. However, Reverend Vuyani Nyobole and Dr Dion Forster, Lecturer in Systematic Theology at Stellenbosch, represented the church. Nyobole started by reminding delegates of the East London TRC hearings of 1997 and spoke about the “unfinished business of the TRC”. This fortunate term could become the main trigger for self-critical reflection and activity for all faith communities in South Africa. To set the unfinished business of the TRC on the agenda also has the advantage of reminding South Africans of promises made in 1997 and it will also reply to unfair criticism of the TRC, claiming it had been a failure. It underlines a point of view I also would adopt instead of focusing on the shortcomings of TRC. The main failure was, namely, not the TRC hearing itself, but the lack of implementation! A lot was said about reparation and justice in the TRC’s recommendations, but very few of these translated into action. Nyobole underlined that the Methodist Church of Southern Africa had been adamant on the issue of the confession of guilt, even before the TRC process. However, “We as a church made many reflections which are reflected in our minutes of Conference and other documents within the church, but we’ve not actually lived up to those,” he said. Rev. Nyobole also expressly pleaded for attending to the unfinished business of the TRC, namely:

- Reparation and restitution for victims.
- Reconciliation as recognition and healing of victims was not practised enough. The founding act of the TRC “emphasised more on truth than on reconciliation”, but reconciliation and therapeutic effects happened during the hearings. Reconciliation, therapy of victims, and listening to them would be a task that faith communities should grasp as their task.
- The churches could not do enough guarding against the moral decay of the society (e.g. corruption in the government).

After Rev Nyobole, Dr Foster added further examples of the unfinished business of the TRC:

- “Very many of our churches have lost touch with a people’s theology.”
- After the TRC, there had been an unfortunate breakdown of relationships between Christian Churches and non-Christian faith communities.

In Foster’s view, South Africa is “not living in a post-apartheid era”, because only laws, ‘nothing’ in society has changed.

After the above submissions, Archbishop Tutu jokingly remarked that it was because of that that he was glad about the moment of his retirement!

In her response to the submissions on behalf of the Methodist Church, commissioners Wildschut and Mkhize underlined the importance of the points made. Mkhize added issues of truth and human rights that are still not resolved. With their answers, the commissioners also underlined the positive efforts the Methodist Church has made to advance the TRC process but also highlighted concrete problems of communication between church members, who were victims of violence and official representatives and who joined initiatives to advocate releases from prison for perpetrators. At the end of the session, Rev Nyobole referred again to the second unfinished point of business of the TRC by saying: “We always have a vision as the church of making every local church a centre of healing and transformation within the local context. Because if it doesn’t happen within the local context, it can’t be imposed.” He also asked for a deeper engagement of the Methodist Church concerning issues of education in creating leaders with high moral standards.

For discourse analysis, it is remarkable that the two representatives of the Methodist church were almost more critical of their Church than the commissioners were. Wildschut, Mkhize and Meiring reminded the audience of the Methodist Church’s role in interfaith activities, in education and efforts toward healing and reparation. Only after being questioned did the church representatives talk about their activities and the vision of the church.

Comparing the agenda set by the representatives of the Methodist Church with the RICSA Report, one may mostly find that the same criticism – justice issues, such as reparations, moral decay, interfaith cooperation and healing on the local level, had been highlighted in 1997 already. However, there was much less attention to gender issues, also absent from the submissions on behalf of the Methodist Church and mostly absent in the other submissions and statements. Was this because things have changed for the better? It seems not, since the representatives of the faith communities at the re-enactment were predominantly male. To my knowledge, the only exception were the representatives of the Hindu community, the SACC, URCSA and TEASA. The speakers from the audience, who spoke in the afternoon of the last day and who had been asked by the organisers to add their points of views and observations, had more women’s voices. Among the commissioners themselves, present at Stellenbosch, were more women than men. Therefore, it seemed obvious that the organisers of the 2014 re-enactment wished for more gender-equality in the discussions, but South African faith communities continued to rarely choose female representatives or church leaders, let alone bishops.



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Most of those representing the faith communities at the re-enactment were predominantly older men, representing the exclusive gender profile of the leaders of the faith communities. This meant that the voices and narratives of the present generation, especially women, were primarily absent or silent.<sup>39</sup>

Probably the most emotional moment during the 2014 re-enactment was the submission by Rev E.G. Fourie from the Dutch Reformed Church of Africa (Nederduitsch Hervormde Kerk van Afrika, NHK), a small church group with about 100 000 members. In 1982, together with the much bigger NGK, the membership of the NHK in the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) was suspended because of their support of apartheid. Rev Fourie referred to a pastoral letter of his church from 1973, where “apartheid has been described as the only honest and Christian policy that would prevent the domination of one group by another”.

Even in 2014, the NHK was not ready to send Rev Fourie or another person in an official capacity to represent it. Fourie made it clear that he does not officially speak on behalf of the NHK. He highlighted this from the beginning:

I am very sad that I am here in my personal capacity. I am very sad that my church chose not to send ... make a delegation official. I am very sad that my church chose not to make a written submission, even being asked.

Rev Fourie described the long journey his church had to go on to reject apartheid in the sphere of church and politics. That rejection was one of the requirements from the WARC in 2004 for the NHK to re-join. In 2010, a resolution was adopted that declared, “The church rejects the approval of apartheid because it is contrary to the gospel of Jesus Christ; it is based on [the] idea [of] mutual irreconcilability; defends injustice; harms the image of God in human beings.” The General Assembly accepted the resolution with a 57 per cent majority, but 100 people protested and formed the group, *Die Steeds Hervormdes* (The Still-Reformed), becoming the base for about 30 congregations with about 5 000 members to break away from the NHK. Rev Fourie concluded by saying:

My Church, when it comes to reconciliation, is in the slow class. Today we refer to it as ‘special needs classes’. My Church has special needs:

- For our past, for our pronouncements in the past, we have a special need for forgiveness.
- For the delicate times we find ourselves in, we have a special need for understanding.

39 Christo Thesnaar. 2018. Alternative and Innovative Approaches to Reconciliation: A South African Perspective. In: M Leiner and C Schließer (eds.). *Alternative Approaches in Conflict Resolution*. London: Palgrave, 125-136. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-58359-4\\_12](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-58359-4_12)

- For the difficult times that lie ahead, we have a special need for support.
- For the challenges ... the opportunities that lie ahead of our Church – and we are a church of Africa as well. It says in our name we are the Nederduitse Hervormde Kerk of Afrika – we are also going nowhere. For the challenges that lie ahead, we have a special need for embracement.

Please embrace my church on the way forward. We are late bloomers. We need your support. I thank you.

After that submission, the public answered with a standing ovation. Several people came to stand next to Fourie. Archbishop Tutu walked over to embrace him as he finished his submission with tears in his eyes.

Commissioner Piet Meiring commented on that very emotional scene, by saying: “We are so grateful that you shared your heart – the experience of the Church – with you, with us. Thank you, thank you for coming to us.”

The rhetorical beauty of the last passage in Rev Fourie’s submission might seem somehow contradictory to the authentic speaking from his heart. However, the scene was received by those present as coming from somebody who spoke the truth on an intense and challenging issue. Rev Fourie did not defend his Church. He was far from the self-presentations of churches that defended themselves against criticism. He could have told a story of a church that achieved change, condemned apartheid that accepted the breakaway of some five per cent of its members and should be acclaimed for its courage. However, Rev Fourie did not; he underlined the weakness of his Church and the special needs it has.

Fourie’s presentation, therefore, is the most impressive example that the 2014 TRC re-enactment created a space for truth. As in 1997, the East London Faith Community Hearing was a social innovation, a different form of common assessment of organisations, far more open to truth and self-criticism than what people normally experience.

Comparing 2014 with 1997, the NHK was not present at all in 1997. However, there was a nonofficial statement by proffs Amie van Wyk, Bennie van der Walt and Ponti Venter, all lecturing at the University of Potchefstroom from the GKSA that, in more than one aspect, paralleled the testimony by Rev Fourie. Their statement started by saying:

We first want to express our sincere and greatest gratitude for this opportunity, Your Grace, Mr Chairman, especially for the two Afrikaners who are very ashamed of your own past and also what we are submitting here, is in great humility ... We are also members of the Reformed Church of South Africa and therefore we are here in our individual capacities and

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not officially representing either our Church, or the institution we work for. We therefore cannot speak on behalf of either the Church or the university and I must say we are sad that our own Church is missing the opportunity of this occasion where we have learnt a lot and which have encouraged us to continue on the way ahead.<sup>40</sup>

Like Rev Fourie, the GKSA professors referred to a declaration of guilt, in that case, a product of a small group. They acknowledge that they did not suffer, but benefitted from apartheid. They also made an interesting claim:

The question then is, what is the correct relationship? Ideas about an independent prophetic role has been mentioned here. I think it is not enough. I think and that is only one suggestion that we have to work out a comprehensive philosophy of society in which we concretise God's central love commandment so that we can see that justice is the form of love we need in political life.

That broad, philosophical perspective was more or less absent from the 2014 re-enactment. On the other hand, there was not nearly such a clear expression of the weakness of the NGK in East London as at the Stellenbosch meeting.

## Final remarks

The fact that the re-enactment happened was a huge success, improved only by the fact that so many faith communities participated, including official representation of the Dutch Reformed Church, the GKSA and the NHK at least by one pastor each, and the three Lutheran Churches by their three bishops. There was energy, as well as trust and respect towards commissioners and towards submissions. Interfaith cooperation persisted, and the quest for theology from below continued to inspire some of the churches.

The RICSA Report concluded by saying: "Will the communities who were eloquent in their commitments to reconstruction and development follow through on these commitments? Or will they simply be a matter of record and nothing else?"<sup>41</sup> Earlier in the report, it stated: "After all, there is one lesson from observing faith communities in South African history (as many of them admitted) it is that words are easy and accomplish little when not backed up with action."<sup>42</sup>

40 Quoted from Alwyn du Plessis, Bennie van der Walt, Amie van Wyk and Ponti Venter. 1997. 'n Openbare Belydenis (Uit Potchefstroom)/An Open Confession from Potchefstroom. In: University of Cape Town. Department of Religious Studies. 2020. *Archive: TRC Faith Community Hearings: Submissions*. <https://bit.ly/3dKiakr> [Accessed 23 March 2018].

41 *The RICSA Report*, 77.

42 *Ibid.*, 72.

With respect to that implementation, the 2014 re-enactment could not report that much had been done since 1998. Inertia seemed to be very strong in faith communities in general. On issues like restitution of property, reparation, justice, as well as on unification of churches, the results of the activities since the 1990s are rather disappointing.

On the issue of gender in the leadership in faith communities, not much progress was made either. Christo Thesnaar calls it, “the apathy of the faith communities towards the process of healing and reconciliation after the TRC ended.”<sup>43</sup> Nevertheless, at least three very positive things can be recorded:

1. All new things are created through concentration. ‘Scenes of common attention’ (Michael Tomasello) are the basis of specific human innovations in thinking as well as in ethics, religion and aesthetics. The TRC consisted of such scenes of intense joint attention. Thus, the TRC faith hearings created a social innovation: Like in 1997, and even more in 2014, they provided a favourable setting and created the space for truth-telling and a self-critical evaluation of representatives of churches.
2. Innovation cannot be forgotten, and it probably will not be either, because the innovation experienced so impressed all and because there is still a lot of energy toward it that should be used in future for further meetings. Why not organise a TRC re-enactment exclusively attended by women?
3. Speaking about ‘unfinished business of the TRC’, the re-enactment answered questions regarding one of the most unfortunate developments in South African society: The increasing criticism of the TRC and of the term ‘reconciliation’ itself. We must make a distinction between a limited and very justified criticism and a negative view of reconciliation! It is right to say that the TRC had shortcomings, that is to say, it led to many exact recommendations that have not been implemented. But it is unfair and wrong if people assume that the entire reconciliation policy as inefficient. Answering those skeptical voices, I would pose the simple question of what the alternative to reconciliation could have been. For South Africa, the answer is quite clear: it would have been a very bloody civil war. Reconciliation entails a long-term process that spans several generations. It “can be defined as the overarching approach to conflicts that focusses on processes of rebuilding relationships. Its goal is to create ‘normal’, ‘trustful’, and if possible ‘good’ and ‘peaceful’ relationships.”<sup>44</sup>

That the term ‘reconciliation’ is still helpful becomes clear from comparison with several possible replacements of that term in the South African debate: The RICSA Report considered ‘healing’ as a replacement. ‘Emotional repair’ would be another, more individualistic expression. Sometimes people may prefer those terms. They underline that healing still is lacking in South Africa in so many respects. However, healing and repair are directed towards the sickness, the negativity that has to be overcome. It seems to me that it is important to have positive goals. Reconciliation aims for positive, trustful

43 Thesnaar, *Alternative and Innovative Approaches*, 136.

44 Martin Leiner. 2018. Conclusion: From Conflict Resolution to Reconciliation. In: Leiner and Schließer, *Alternative Approaches*, 175-185. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-58359-4\\_17](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-58359-4_17)

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friendship. To speak about 'reconciliation' also has a further advantage. Not everything can be healed, and some losses are permanent. We, therefore, have been reconciled with the unrepairable.

In my view, it appears most popular today to use justice as an alternative to reconciliation. The problem is that there is no opposition between reconciliation and justice. Almost everything in reconciliation has to be about justice, or there will be no reconciliation. Why maintain the focus on reconciliation? The reason is the plurality of the understandings of justice. In all cases, we have different justice claims from different partners in conflict.<sup>45</sup> There is a need to search for reconciliation between those justice-claims. Therefore, justice as an approach cannot replace reconciliation. People tend to confound judgement with their idea of justice. There have been cases where people confused justice with benefits. Only in a joint reconciliation process, the danger of violent conflicts between justice claims can be overcome.

Other people prefer 'social cohesion' to reconciliation. That, however, can be misleading. Social cohesion can be produced by problematic means such as submission to a charismatic leader, to conservative traditions or by opposing a common enemy.

Everybody knows that the word reconciliation can be and has been misused. Nevertheless, I hope that it can be understood profoundly again and so become a leading perspective for South Africa.

Alternative approaches to reconciliation, creative projects, long-time engagement of faith communities for the healing of trauma and economic justice seem the most important things, often missing in current South Africa.

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45 Cf. Rudolf Schuessler. 2018. Justice in Negotiations and conflict Resolution. In: Leiner and Schließer, *Alternative Approaches*, 25-36. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-58359-4\\_3](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-58359-4_3)